

Even in our military society where coping with change has become a way of life, it seemed during a December trip to Robins Air Force, Ga., that the men and women there had been dealt more than their fair share.

In short order, after only five years flying the B-1 Lancer, the Air National Guard's 116th Bomb Wing at Robins lost its bomber mission in 2001 and in 2002 merged with the active duty 93rd Air Control Wing to become the 116th Air Control

Wing, flying the E-8C joint surveillance target attack radar system [See "From the Gound Up," May 2002]. It's the first blended wing in Air Force history, and they've made it happen without a blueprint or road map. But it was a bumpy road in the early going [See "Two Cultures, One Force," Page 20].

There was the inevitable clash of cultures between active duty and Guard forces. Then the merging plan was accelerated from two years to

only about four months. Three months later, the wing was off to war in Iraq where it achieved great success.

The emotional reactions to their sudden and draconian lifestyle change seemed as varied as the logistical challenges they faced, such as coping with rules, regulations and laws that prohibit their Guard commander from initiating military legal actions toward

active duty airmen.

It seemed that few embraced the new wing concept with open arms initially, but

most people I met seemed to have gotten over the initial shock (I think they called that the "storming phase" in the days of Quality Air Force) and now see benefits instead of obstacles. Younger airmen seemed the most flexible and optimistic.

One senior noncommissioned officer, however, described the merger in up-and-down terms saying at one point the blend seemed "broken" but later described it as a workable venture he was proud to be a part of. Unlike the younger airmen, he probably approached the blend with a career filled with similar changes accompa-

nied with the usual growing pains.

Maybe he was thinking back to a long career in which he's contended with changes such as the introduction of computers, more frequent and longer deployments, and increased workloads that accompanied the manpower reduction after the Cold War. Oh, and don't forget heartburn suffered by many when an Army battle dress uniform was pressed upon us in exchange for the old olive drabs. Today that uniform is as familiar as a pair of faded Levi's.

However, such change always seems to turn out like the prediction made by a young captain about the future of the blended wing at Robins: "It's going good, but it's not natural. But give it time," he added, and things will be "normal and efficient in a few years."

I left Robins with great admiration for what they had accomplished and how they held it together against such a sea of change. I remember thinking with some relief and gratitude how stable my life and job seemed compared to theirs. But if, or when, I get thrown into the fray again, I'll be able to think back to the folks at Robins for a little inspiration. Somehow, I think I'll have that opportunity.

— Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts

Did you want change with that career?

Active duty Senior Airman Christopher Griffith (left) and air guard technician Tech. Sgt.

Brain Sheffield pre-flight their consoles before engine start on the E-8C joint surveillance target attack radar system. They're both communication systems technicians with the Air Force's only blended wing — the 116th Air Control Wing. Except for a two-year stint in the Army National Guard, Sergeant Sheffield has been in the 116th since 1982 and witnessed many changes in that time. During the 1980s and early 1990s, the 116th Fighter Wing flew F-105 Wild Weasels, F-4 Phantoms and F-15 Eagles before transitioning to the 116th Bomb Wing flying B-1 Lancers in 1996.

by Master Sgt. Efrain Gonzalez

